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Hush, hush, who's there? The CIA..

London, Tuesday.

CIGARETTE smoke swirled around the Insight office, the coffee went cold, as we pondered new leads on last week's story on heroin, murder, Australia, and the CIA. On the television, Lillee was trying to batter Boycott into submission. Then the phone rang.

It was an urgent Australian voice, long distance: "I worked for the CIA in Australia for five years. We bugged Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and helped bring him down. Meet me at the Rome Hilton 1.30 tomorrow and I'll sell you the full story for £5,000. But be careful. The CIA are trying to kill me."

The phone went dead. Boycott stonewalled another Lillee bombshell like he was at Verdun. We left the cheque book at home but booked two seats for Rome on the morning flight to meet "James."

Rome, Wednesday. We pulled into the Hilton and a tall man, crewcut, freckled, late 40s, about 200 lbs, stepped out of the shadows. "Jim Flynn," he announced. He glanced around. "I've cased the place. I think we're safe."

We headed for the poolside restaurant and took a rear table, backs against the wall. He stabbed into an omelette. "It all started when I was selling holiday homes up near the Great Barrier Reef, ten years ago.

INSIGHT

That's when I met the American you named as Mike Hand except I knew him as MacAllister and I never did learn his first name. He asked me for a favour. Would I bug the Moonglow Hotel on Mission Beach, no questions asked? I agreed. I put a couple of bugs in every room, and you know what?"

"What?"

"When I went back six weeks later I found out that Whitlam had been staying there. Mike Hand must have been the CIA chief." Then he wanted to bug another guy, this big labour politician in Queensland, but I couldn't get into the house.

Flynn was getting edgy. "It's too public here," he said, "and those guys over there." He pointed to the waiters. "They're making me uneasy."

We rented a room, gave him a beer and he started again. "They sent me to England and I had to take my orders via a phone box in Trafalgar Square. Then they sent me to Vienna."

"Like Harry Lime?"

"It was. Amazing, even the same places. I had to take this guy to the Prater Park and it turned out he was the Russian defector Chadrin. But that was it. He was never seen again. I'd fingered the guy but I had no idea why. Then they framed me. Jesus I was inside

Brixton Prison for 16 months.

"What for?"

Flynn took a swig of his beer. "Deception," he replied.

We called London and waited, while the sun dipped towards the hills of Rome. London called back and read a newspaper report. "Con man's tale beats Le Carre" was the headline.

Flynn said the story had conned the FBI, the CIA, and Chadrin's wife into believing he could find Chadrin. They gave him money and air tickets and he kept the con going for over a year.

Orange shadows spread across the silent room. We told Flynn what London had said. He flushed crimson and walked out.

London, Thursday. Boycott and Lillee had fought to a standstill. The phone rang. It was Flynn. "You didn't give me a fair hearing," he said. We said goodbye. Flynn rang again. "That story you read out. The reporter was in the pay of the CIA."